

Central Intelligence Agency



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Kim Chong-il's Visit to China

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Summary

Both P'yongyang and Beijing appear to have largely achieved their objectives with the early June visit to China of Kim Il-song's son and heir apparent--Kim Chong-il. The visit provided the most explicit Chinese endorsement yet of Kim Chong-il's special status in North Korea. P'yongyang's media treatment has exploited the visit to burnish the younger Kim's image at home and has emphasized that close Sino-North Korean solidarity is assured "generation after generation." The Chinese, who are uncertain over Kim Chong-il's longer term prospects and have a distaste for personality cults, probably saw the visit as another in a series of gestures toward P'yongyang necessary mainly to preempt any Soviet inroads in the North. The Chinese also may believe that they now can afford some flexibility in their approach to Seoul. Beijing had delayed acknowledging Kim Chong-il and still maintains a measure of reserve toward the succession scheme by referring to Kim as "one of the principal leaders" of the North--a formulation less sweeping than the honorifics used by P'yongyang.

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Visit Confirmed

Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party Hu Yaobang on 7 July belatedly confirmed widespread speculation that Kim Chong-il had made an unpublicized visit to China in early June.

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Korea Branch, Northeast Asia Division, with contributions by [redacted] Foreign Policy Branch, China Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Korea Branch, [redacted]

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Beijing and P'yongyang have characterized the visit as "unofficial," but both sides have noted that Kim came at Hu's personal invitation and that he had "very cordial and warm exchanges" with Chinese leaders. The invitation most likely was conveyed by Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian when he visited North Korea 20-25 May. [redacted]

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The Foreign Minister's trip may have been prompted by North Korean protests over Beijing's unprecedented direct negotiations with Seoul following the hijacking of a Chinese airliner to South Korea on 5 May. Beijing denies any connection between the hijacking and Wu's visit, but the steady stream of party, economic, and cultural delegations that have shuttled between China and North Korea in recent weeks is clearly intended to underscore Sino-North Korean friendship. [redacted]

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The desire to placate P'yongyang may also have influenced the timing of the Chinese invitation to the younger Kim. It is also possible, however, that the trip was agreed upon as early as Kim Il-song's visit to China last September. [redacted]

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According to North Korean reports, Kim met with Hu, Deng Xiaoping, President Li Xiannian, Premier Zhao Ziyang, and other top officials. However, neither Beijing nor P'yongyang has provided many details of Kim Chong-il's itinerary or his meetings with Chinese leaders. Kim appears to have arrived in Beijing by train on 2 June and to have toured east-central China with stops in Nanjing (5 June), Hangzhou, and Shanghai (8 June). Kim reportedly returned to P'yongyang from Beijing on the 12th. In our view, the chief purpose of the trip was for Kim to meet a wide range of Chinese leaders and to acquaint him with Deng's economic reforms. We doubt that either side viewed the visit as an opportunity for definitive talks on pending bilateral issues. [redacted]

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P'yongyang Pleased With Results

The visit clearly went a long way toward satisfying P'yongyang's desire for Chinese acknowledgment of Kim Chong-il's special status in North Korea. The initial Xinhua report that carried Hu Yaobang's reference to the visit also quoted visiting North Korean assembly chairman Yang Hyong-sop as conveying Kim's "great satisfaction" with the trip. Yang observed that Kim had briefed a plenary session of the Korean Workers Party Central Committee--presumably the Seventh Plenum 15-17 June--concerning the visit. [redacted]

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In our view, the North Koreans were particularly pleased

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that Kim was invited as the personal guest of Hu Yaobang--which P'yongyang is likely to view as symbolizing Beijing's desire for close ties between the next generation of Chinese and North Korean leaders. For example, P'yongyang's handling of the visit has emphasized the solidarity of Sino-North Korean friendship "generation after generation." The visit probably diminished whatever concerns may have existed in P'yongyang that China's hesitancy to acknowledge Kim Chong-il's status might encourage domestic opposition to the succession scenario.

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The visit also marked an enhanced role for Kim Chong-il in North Korean foreign affairs. To date, Kim Chong-il has only rarely been reported as meeting with foreign delegations, and never in a prominent role. Since late May, however, foreign media reporting on Kim Chong-il appears to have increased. Laotian, Cuban, East German, and Yugoslav media--in addition to Chinese--have all carried reports on Kim Chong-il's writings and his emerging position in North Korea. We believe that P'yongyang may be laying the groundwork for Kim to have more contact with foreign delegations now that an inaugural trip to China is behind him.

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There has been press speculation--for example in Tokyo--that Kim Chong-il is now in charge of party and state operations in North Korea and that his father provides overall guidance but has little involvement in day-to-day affairs. We believe a large and increasing share of administrative responsibilities has been taken over by Kim Chong-il, but rumors of Kim Il-song's semi-retirement are almost certainly exaggerated.

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Chinese Exercise Caution

Beijing's handling of the visit appears to have been guided by its desire to placate P'yongyang but to avoid full endorsement of the North Korean succession plan.

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The North Korean succession poses a dilemma for the Chinese:

- For strategic reasons, Beijing believes it must actively cultivate continuing close relations with P'yongyang to prevent the emergence of another pro-Soviet state on China's borders.
- Nevertheless, they probably want to avoid becoming too closely identified with Kim Chong-il in case the succession gets off track.
- The Chinese leadership may also be chary of too close an

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association with the unfolding Kim Chong-il personality cult.

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Chinese observers no doubt have recognized the steady increase in Kim's personal authority since his elevation to party secretary in October 1980 and the apparent absence of effective opposition to the succession plan. Beijing apparently decided as early as last year to begin recognizing Kim's special status. China's belated televising of Deng and Hu greeting Kim Chong-il during their "secret visit" to P'yongyang last spring was the first clear Chinese acknowledgment of the younger Kim. The hijacking incident may have accelerated this process.

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The Chinese treatment of Kim's visit maintained a measure of reserve, however. For example, Hu's unusual invitation to Kim as his "personal guest" constituted recognition of Kim's important role in the North Korean Workers Party but enabled the Chinese to avoid the ceremonial trappings normally associated with visits by high North Korean officials. The Chinese media also failed to report remarks by North Korean officials that the visit would help ensure Sino-North Korean friendship "forever through generations."

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As is usually the case in Sino-North Korean dealings, the treatment given the visit by Beijing's Korean language broadcasts to Korea was more elaborate and less reserved. Nevertheless, the Chinese avoided using North Korean honorifics that clearly place Kim second only to his father.

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The trip almost certainly gave the Chinese leadership its best opportunity to date to assess the younger Kim's personality, attitudes, and intellect. Chinese leaders are probably fairly confident that Kim Il-song would not allow Moscow to gain a predominant influence over North Korean policies in exchange for economic or military assistance. But the Chinese may still view Kim Chong-il with some uncertainty.

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The Chinese also may believe that Kim's visit has gained them some leeway to broaden contacts with the South Koreans, aimed at least in part at ensuring strict treatment by Seoul of the Chinese hijackers now on trial. For example, last week Beijing agreed for the first time to permit a South Korean official to visit China. The decision to admit the official--who is participating in a UN agricultural training program--apparently reflects new flexibility in Beijing's policy toward South Korea, at least within the framework of international organizations.

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SUBJECT: Kim Chong-il's Visit to China [redacted]

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